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Posted on Wed, Apr. 27, 2005

Chemical plants need regulation to safeguard from terrorist attacks, experts say

LARA JAKES JORDAN
Associated Press**WASHINGTON** - U.S. chemical plants are not adequately protected against terrorists, critics said Wednesday, pushing for federal regulation.

Investigators described spotty results in how well the chemical industry is prepared to respond in the event of an attack. About one-fifth of the nation's 15,000 chemical facilities are close to population centers.

"Al-Qaida or one of its many radical jihadist imitators will attempt to carry out a major terrorist attack on the United States within the next five years," said Stephen Flynn, a counterterrorism expert at the Council on Foreign Relations.

"At the top of the list of likely targets is the chemical industry," he told the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

At issue is whether the government should regulate security at privately operated chemical plants.

The Homeland Security Department has identified 297 chemical facilities where a toxic release could affect 50,000 or more people.

A department spokesman, Brian Roehrkasse, said the department is working with plant owners and operators, and local and state authorities "to put in place security measures, surveillance equipment and effective response plans."

Such measures, however, are voluntary.

Richard A. Falkenrath, a former deputy homeland security adviser at the White House, said the danger from by certain chemicals "stands alone as uniquely deadly, pervasive, and susceptible to terrorist attack."

He said security at chemicals plants sharply contrasts with safeguards at nuclear power facilities and commercial airports, which are federally regulated.

Falkenrath was critical of the Bush administration's efforts to strengthen security at chemical plants. But, he added, "some portion of this responsibility clearly belongs to me."

Falkenrath helped set the White House's policy until he left last May.

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In recent accidental releases at plants, mass exposure to dangerous toxins were avoided only because of rainstorms, shifting winds that scrubbed chemicals from the air and other factors, said Carolyn W. Merritt, chairman of the U.S. Chemical safety and Hazard Investigation Board. The federal agency does not have regulation authority.

Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., also testified at the hearing. Corzine first introduced a chemical security bill in October 2001. It has yet to be acted upon by the Senate.

In his testimony, Corzine said New Jersey has 11 chemical plants where a "worst-case release of toxic chemicals could threaten more than a million people."

Corzine urged Congress to pass laws that would improve security at chemical facilities by requiring reinforced storage tanks, more security officers and improved detection devices.

Industry officials who oppose regulation said they have installed voluntary security measures at chemical plants.

"Our members are committed to securing their facilities against acts of terrorism," said Rob Carver of the Synthetic Organic Chemical Manufacturers Association, which represents 300 chemical companies.

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Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee: <http://hsgac.senate.gov/>



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